

Shades of Donna Hopkins The Life and Times of the Rockcastle Co. ATC Principal

**“You never stand
so tall as when you
bend over to help a
child.”**

**Inscription on
award given to
Donna Hopkins by
the Rockcastle
Co. Local School
District**



Rockcastle Co. ATC Principal Donna Hopkins will officially retire on June 30, 2004 with thirty-three years of experience – all at the same school. She began as a business and office instructor on July 1, 1971. In August 1988, she began serving double duty as instructor and acting principal until she officially became head of the former Harry S. Sparks Vocational School on Feb. 16, 1989 - now officially called the Rockcastle Co. Area Technology Center (ATC). Her hard work and dedication to vocational technical education and students from all walks of life are an inspiration. She is held in high regard throughout the entire KY Tech system of schools and the Rockcastle Co. local school district.

When someone retires, what do you remember about his or her contributions, personality and work ethic? Based on thirty-three years experience, people will undoubtedly remember Donna Hopkins for her smiling face; can do attitude and tremendous love for kids and family.

“I want people to remember me knowing that they knew I had the kids at heart. The kids always come first because they are what we are all about – helping kids to develop self confidence, good citizenship, leadership qualities, skills, and to become contributing members of society,” says Donna. “I basically have a very good outlook on life and can stay happy about things, but I feel the most important contribution I have made is to always put the kids first.”



Hopkins' faculty and staff wholeheartedly agree. Stories emerged when recounting years of experiences in helping students to succeed. There was the time when Donna and her husband Tony both took turns helping a male health science student get to and from his clinical rotations because he had no transportation. This meant leaving home early to pick him up from his home in the morning and making arrangements to get him to and from various locations inside and outside Rockcastle Co. This “help” was given for an entire semester. “If we hadn’t helped, he would not have been able to graduate. I just couldn’t let that happen,” says Donna.

Then there was the time when Donna helped a mother of 14 children get a set of eyeglasses. Her husband had been murdered while working at an all night service station. The woman was taking classes, as well as trying to get her GED. She was having trouble keeping up with the work because she was unable to read without getting severe headaches – this was directly related to poor eyesight and the need for glasses. After making several calls, Donna contacted the local Lions Club to see about getting this lady a pair of eyeglasses. The Lions Club made a special exception (normally they just provide glasses to kids) and the woman ultimately graduated. “I just felt this woman needed a little extra help to succeed and with a few calls, we were



able to correct the vision problem,” says Hopkins. “It has been my privilege to have her children enrolled in our school and I’m ending my career with one of her grandchildren here too.”

Another time, a student from an extremely poor family needed a pair of size 14 black shoes in order to be in ‘official dress’ for the FBLA (Future Business Leaders of America) state competition. It was Hopkins who made sure the student had those shoes so he would not be embarrassed or penalized during competition. “Do you know how difficult it is to find size 14 shoes?” asks Hopkins. “We called all over Rockcastle Co. to help get this

student a pair of shoes. We finally had to borrow a pair to get him through the competition – and he was able to compete and feel proud. That’s what it’s all about!”

When the school served postsecondary students, there was an economically challenged female student who entered the practical nursing program via the dislocated workers program. She hadn’t had a set of teeth for years and was used to getting along without them. She did well in her classes; however, the practical nursing teacher felt it was necessary she have a set of teeth before going into a hospital setting. It was Hopkins who made contact with the Christian Appalachian Project (CAP) to get her a pair of false teeth. “She was delighted to get a new set of teeth and it made a major impact in helping her self esteem. She smiled brightly during graduation.” says Hopkins.

Unselfish with time, effort and energy, these are just a few tidbits of information where Donna Hopkins has put the student first.

While she would never boast, Hopkins takes great delight in saying, “Since I have been principal here, a student from every program has become a teacher in our school and/or part of the staff. We have also been lucky in having a person, student, organization or program win an award in our annual departmental awards and recognition program. We have had winners in eight of the nine categories over the years.”



“Patricia Himes (business and office), Rhonda Childress (health science), and Kristi Reynolds (administrative secretary) have all been former students of mine,” says Hopkins. “I’m proud of each of these ‘kids’ and know firsthand what a wonderful job they do each and every day.”

Hopkins hired Reynolds shortly after she became principal because when the previous principal retired, so did his secretary. “I hired Kristi because she was one of my best students and I knew she would do an excellent job for me as well as the school,” said Hopkins. “I have never been disappointed.”

“I have known Mrs. Hopkins since 1982. During this time she has been my teacher, supervisor, friend and an outstanding role model,” says Reynolds. “Working with Mrs. Hopkins has been wonderful. She is a caring person who puts everyone before herself. I wish her the best for her retirement and I will truly miss her.”

“In all the years I have known Donna, I have never seen her have a bad day – she is always smiling,” says Patricia Himes, business and office instructor and the 1997 KY Tech Teacher of the Year.

Donna and Kristi enjoy a happy moment reminiscing.



“There are a zillion things you could say about Donna,” says Health Science Instructor and 1999 KY Tech New Teacher Institute Award Winner Rhonda Childress. “What is the one thing you narrow it down to say? As a student, I never knew anyone to have the energy she has and she has even more now than she had back then.”

Ralph Baker, the 1995 KY Tech Teacher of the Year, former welding instructor and current school counselor says, “Over the past 14 years, Donna has helped me to grow educationally, personally and professionally by providing me with opportunities to learn the KY Tech system and all the available possibilities it could provide. She cares about students and employees and wants the best for the Rockcastle Co. community.”

The reverence others hold for Donna is evident because of the way she has conducted herself over the years. She has proven to be steadfast, knowledgeable, helpful, caring and loving. She believes in the value of

**L to R:
Rhonda,
Patricia,
Kristi
and
Donna
pose in
Donna's
office.**

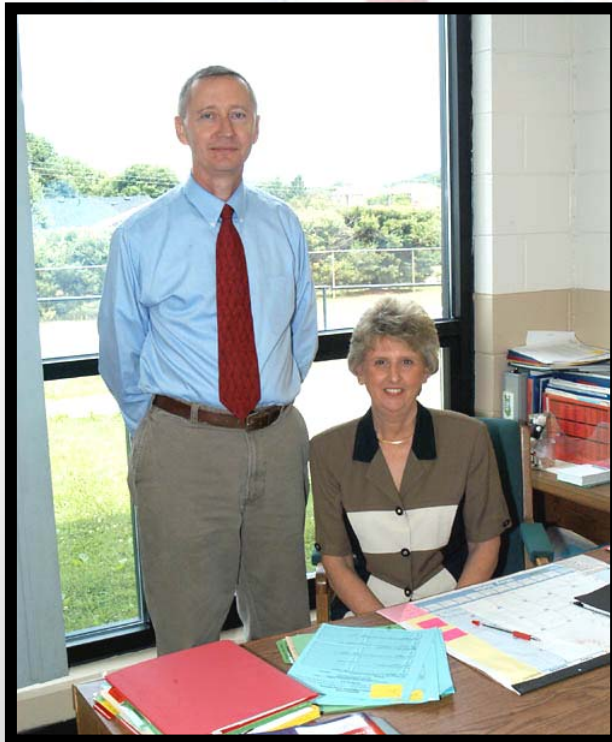


**Ralph
Baker and
Donna
stand
before
the ATC's
many
Flags of
Excellence**

vocational-technical education for all students. “My own two boys, Ken Shay and Stephen, had to attend my school because if mine didn’t attend, how could I convince any other parent in the county to send their kid(s)? And besides, they both learned while they were here.”

A compliment by any standards is for the local district superintendent to appreciate and take notice of the work a principal does. “Donna Hopkins has more energy and enthusiasm upon her exit than many folks possess when they enter the field of education,” says Rockcastle Co. Superintendent Larry Hammond. “She is truly a team player. As with any ‘good’ team member, she would fill the void for weaker players because she was determined to make ‘it’ work.”

Larry Hammond and Donna have had a mutually beneficial association in helping kids to succeed.



Question and Answer Session with Donna Hopkins

Q: How did you become interested in vocational technical education?

Hopkins: I wanted to teach school since I was in 4th grade and I never changed my mind. During a career education class, my teacher had a fishing pole in a 'lake' and she clipped on a career for each student – my career was a teacher. When I was in high school in Russell Co., we didn't have a vocational school; however, I took part in a vocational survey during my senior year in 1967. The new Russell Co. Vocational School was built the next year. It is now called KY Tech-Lake Cumberland Area Technology Center.



Q: What do you consider to be the most important legislation impacting vocational-technical education?

Hopkins: The 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) and 1997 Postsecondary Education Reform Act.

Q: What do you consider to be the most important issue facing vocational-technical education today?

Hopkins: I think that when the requirements for high school graduation increased, it became a detriment for vocational technical education. We have to get academic credit for technical education programs in order to stay alive. If students don't receive credit towards graduation, they will have difficulty in taking our classes. If students in our programs are receiving dual credit for courses at the

postsecondary level, it should be no problem to receive academic credit for graduation requirements. In the long run, it transfers to the postsecondary level.

Q: What are the qualities that make a good principal?

Hopkins: First and foremost, one has to be qualified for the position. But in addition to the qualifications, I think it is important to have a high energy level, to be a people person, compassionate and caring. Of course, to me, students always come first - so I think a principal must be able to make sacrifices in order to make sure the student comes first.

Q: What guidance and or advice would you provide to any new principal within the system?

Hopkins: Make every administrative decision based on what effect it will have on students. It is important to remember that you need your teachers and staff worse than they need you. This is because they can do without you as a principal since they can teach their students – but you can't run a building without your teachers. Do everything you can to have good instructional programs because good programs keep good students.

Q: If you were to bury an item in a time capsule, what would it be and why?

Hopkins: I would put in current text books, a listing of our current programs, and the current curriculum into the capsule because I would like to see if the programs we are offering today are still the same as what they will be offering when the capsule is opened. I'll give you an example – auto body repair is now collision technology.

Q: Is there anything that you would have done differently during your tenure as principal?

Hopkins: I am completely satisfied with my decision to become a teacher and principal. It has provided me with many years of experiences that could not be paralleled through any other job. I am satisfied with what we have done together as a team and pleased to have helped so many. But, the worst thing about being a principal is when you loose one of the kids. It just about breaks your heart. If I could change anything, it would be to make sure the kids are always safe.

Editor's Note: Donna's world rises and sets with her husband Tony and two sons, Ken Shay and Stephen. Her love and sense of duty for family underscore the basic fiber of moral decency and spiritual strength. In my humble opinion, she is indeed everything that everyone has claimed her to be.

We love you for your smile and depth of character. We will miss you.

